

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Meaning of Christianity for Rural Life*

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It is a real pleasure to have a part in this program and to make whatever contribution I can to the objective of this Convocation which, as I understand it, is to give a new impetus to the rural church and to crystallize a movement looking toward an improved religious life in rural America. I must confess at the outset that there is nothing new in what I am to present. So far as I am able to judge, the basic concerns are the same. The war situation has only intensified the issues and made even more imperative the appreciation of those values that some of us have been proclaiming through the years as the primary consideration not only for a strong, satisfying rural life, but for all of life. Dr. J. H. Kolb of the University of Wisconsin has stated these values as follows:

1. The primacy of the family;
2. Land - The earth as God's gift;
3. The importance of cooperative effort;
4. The spiritual quality of man.

To these I should like to add a fifth--the significance of the community. The immediate situation created by the war has, as usual, had the effect of setting aside some of these considerations, but as the war comes to an end and we face the aftermath, involving as it inevitably will a drastic readjustment of our industrial life, once again we will be face to face with the acute problems of unemployment, a back-to-the-land movement and the reconsideration of all those things that rural leaders have insisted are the foundation of any worthy civilization. Thus we do well now to call attention to these rural resources, that from every point of view are so essential to moral, social, and spiritual living.

The meaning of Christianity for rural life is, in general, the same

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as for life in the city: it is a gospel of redemption. Rural people as individuals need to be redeemed; rural society is also in need of redemption. If I were to set down in a single sentence what the meaning and purpose of Christianity is for rural life I would say--To hasten the coming of the Kingdom in rural America. There is a text for us to this end: "Repent, for the Kingdom is at hand." Its command to us is to go out to rural areas as elsewhere and preach a gospel of repentance. Change your mind for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Rural people need this message in its modern as well as its historic meaning and implications just as much as the people of the cities. In its historic sense Christianity has come to our rural areas with a gospel of individual conversion. Most of us are familiar with the revival meetings that characterized the earlier days of the rural church and that still obtain in some of the more remote sections of the country, and we thank God for whatever good was derived from them and grant that there was much good, for the church as it now exists is, in the main, the product of such programs in individual conversion.

But most of the old revivalism has lost its meaning for rural life. Much of it was never what it was supposed to be and ultimately went to seed in fanatical emotionalism. The Christian religion must be given new meaning in terms of salvation for rural life. Rural people need salvation, but they need salvation in terms of a more constructive and wholesome Kingdom of God interpretation than prevailed in the past. Rural society needs salvation in terms of those values which we now see, in the clearer light of an intelligent understanding of the Gospel, have special significance for rural welfare and development.

To try to define the meaning of Christianity for rural life for this conference would seem a superfluous task. Christianity was born and raised, as it were, in a rural environment. The Bible is a rural book; it is the history of the experiences of rural people in their search for God and their struggle to achieve His will as they lived out their days in simple but rigorous rural conditions.

The coming of the Saviour is itself a fact of rural life that should be given greater recognition, the significance of which is growing with the passing of time.

People are still asking, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" One can well imagine the conversation in Jerusalem when the announcement was made that the Saviour of men would come out of the remote village of Nazareth. Jerusalem of course was the only place from which to expect such a leader. But the fact remains that from Nazareth the Messiah came, and it was Jerusalem which crucified Him. The world has evidently changed very little in certain respects, particularly in this attitude of the superiority of the city to the country. To my mind this is one of the most devastating elements with which rural life has to contend. It has penetrated almost every realm. Farmers are now beginning to extricate themselves from it in the matter of their relative status in agriculture versus industry. We see this expressed in the varied ways in which farm leadership and organizations are asserting themselves in the total economic life and in national affairs, but the tragedy is that these same farmers accept with little protest this inferiority complex in matters of education and religion in their communities. The idea still prevails that there must be something wrong with a teacher or a preacher if he remains in the rural school or the rural church. So far as this problem characterizes the rural church our ecclesi-

astical leadership is also to blame. So long as the appointment or calling of a rural minister continues on the present basis there is little hope to change this inferiority complex. The rural ministers could themselves do much to change the present status, and we may hope that this conference will take a long step forward in that direction.

If there is any one meaning that Christianity has for rural life, it is that all life is sacred. People in rural areas have the same needs, the same hopes and aspirations as the people in the city, and Christianity comes as the answer. There is nothing inferior about rural life.

But Christianity has meaning for rural life in some very specific ways. By the very nature of rural life there is of necessity a desire for and response to religious things that only Christianity can satisfy. God has the farmer, we may say, in a vise--he has to reckon with God at every turn. And while life has become more complex even in rural areas, the basic needs arising out of rural living are the same. If anything, one might say they are more intensified by the increasing complexity. The seasons as they come and go, seed-time and harvest, life and death--these are the everlasting facts of life in rural areas that stand out in sharp relief in contrast to the city, and it is to these facts that Christianity comes with its gospel of reconciliation and its eternal answer. There is no other answer.

Attention will be called in this conference to the distinctive values in rural life that suggest the meaning of rural life for Christianity. Is it not possible that the specific meaning of Christianity for rural life is within these same values? At the risk of seeming repetitious, I am assuming that such is the case.

Christianity is concerned with people. Wherever the social trends are such that they produce the primary reproductive centers of human life, it must surely follow that in these situations Christianity has significant meaning. Our rural areas for the most part do constitute this reproductive basis, hence Christianity has a special significance for rural people. In these rural areas where the largest proportion of children are born and where they will remain through the formative period of childhood and youth, here it would seem that Christianity has a special mission, and the church, both national and local, is remiss that does not seize the opportunity to make available and meaningful the Christian philosophy of life. If Christianity can be made really meaningful to this seed bed of our population, we should have little to fear as to what would happen elsewhere.

In the realm of the home and the family the same is equally true. If it is a fact, and it is, that in our population we have the largest proportion of large families in rural areas, then it follows that Christianity has a unique contribution to make to our rural family life. After all is said, the home and the family are more important than the church. The church should exist for the homes and families of the community, to make Christianity meaningful to these homes. This, to my way of thinking, is the most important service that the church could render. This calls for something beyond preaching, or the worship service or the church school, important as these are as agencies to enrich the home and family life. I am thinking of a service to be rendered to the home and the family as a unit in itself. Such a program, it seems to me, would help to make each home a sanctuary of God in which the vital things of the Christian life could be made paramount. Christianity should have this meaning for rural life.

In view of what is happening to the home just now as a result of war emergencies, I believe it is particularly important to conserve the home and family values wherever they remain in any degree less affected or almost undisturbed by the war. There is no place where the family has not been affected in some way, but our rural homes in all probability have been less disturbed so far as the family values are concerned. In all too many instances in our cities the homes just now are being used as a means to an end, and that end, of course--war. Millions of homes have lost their privacy, and the normal relations of parents to their children have been destroyed. The home is an end in itself, and, when that has gone, there is not much left upon which to build a Christian civilization.

Christianity comes in this moment of chaos and catastrophe and pleads with us to conserve and enrich these home and family values. This in a supreme sense is its message for rural life.

Next to the home in rural life comes the community in the realm of social and spiritual significance. The days that are now upon us are calling loudly for some rebirth of spiritual motivation in community life. Time was when the church did function in a very real sense as a community institution. The changing community and the various factors of change in the institutions of the community, such as the school, have all detracted from the spiritual entity of the community. The church has been sidetracked. For this the church itself oftentimes is responsible. Where there is overchurching and competition it is impossible for Christianity to have a meaning for the community. In many instances the church is the most divisive factor, destroying the community spirit and thus making impossible the contribution that Christianity has above everything else to make to the community basis of life. Churches in rural life should consider seriously this fact and should so reorganize in order that Christianity may make its genuine community contribution.

We need to remember also that this community basis of life is an essential factor in democracy. It was in the face-to-face experiences of the simpler rural community life that our democratic ideals and experiences found their rootage. Our cities are perilous places for democracy because there is no community basis of life.

Democracy is the political expression of Christianity, and it is to our rural communities that we continue to look for an opportunity to enrich the democratic process. Christianity gives meaning to rural life in terms of the democratic process. In these days in which we are concerned about the preservation of democracy in the world, we will do well to keep alive and fresh the well-springs of democracy in our rural communities through the ministry of the rural church.

This conference will lay much stress upon land and land tenure as vital factors in rural life. Land is a primary factor and rural value in religion. J. H. Bradley in his Autobiography of Earth¹ has stated the case in a brief paragraph.

"The forces that mold the good earth have likewise molded humanity. Physiographic variations of the land have everywhere varied the lives of the inhabitants. And man who must follow the earth wheresoever it may lead, must bend to the earth's limitations."

But the meaning of Christianity to rural life as related to land is not easily accepted. Nevertheless the fact remains that without a Christian conception of

(1) Autobiography of Earth, by J. H. Bradley. Coward McCann, New York. Quoted with the kind permission of the publisher.

ownership and use, this basic foundation of life--the land-- loses its value. The result is depletion, erosion, and all the other ills to which land has become prey in recent years. The following statement from Herbert Agar's book, The Pursuit of Happiness,¹ is indicative of what we have in mind.

"1. Within a few generations America has destroyed, beyond cure, about 100 million acres of once fertile land (100 million acres means an area the size of all the New England States plus Kentucky plus Indiana.)

"2. Another hundred million acres of crop land will be gone for good within a generation or two, if our present habits of using them are not changed.

"3. About 165 million acres of grasslands have been made worthless by cultivation and overgrazing, followed by fire, drought and dust. Most of this can be redeemed with long patient, expensive care."

Christianity surely has some meaning for this criminal waste and exploitation of the land. Stewardship is a Christian doctrine. If stewardship cannot be secured in the relation of farmers to the land, then stewardship as a Christian doctrine is impossible. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." There is desperate need of the message of Christianity in rural life with special significance for the land.

But when we have said everything that can be said about land and its spiritual significance, we are driven to the further conclusion that it is the man on the land that is our primary concern. Again I should like to refer to that important address made by Dr. J. H. Kolb on "Shifting Points of Emphasis in Rural Life and Agriculture," in which he lays particular stress upon this human emphasis. I thoroughly agree with him that the emerging emphasis is on the people. The differing capacities of people must be taken into account. At least it can be said that the consideration of the human capacities and values is equally important with land values and use. After all, the central meaning of Christianity for rural life or any other life is the sacredness of human personality, and it is important to consider all our rural resources and programs in order that rural people can be helped to the highest possible development and life be made abundant and satisfying.

Another value to which reference should be made is that of creative work. I fully appreciate the difficulty of preaching the virtue of work in a day when the whole current of thought and planning is in the opposite direction. But I will still insist that from the rural point of view we must come to grips with this aspect of rural life. As far as I can see, honest toil will continue to be a necessity in rural life. No one who knows rural life will go there expecting to have an easy time. Farmers of all people are fully conscious of work as a basic necessity. The recent depression years have sapped much of the value and joy of honest toil, with the result that there have been a loss of inner resources and the destruction of the morals of people. Some people are now realizing that they have been so absorbed in the pursuit of easy money without work that they have missed everything worth while in life. Work for them has been regarded not as a virtue but as a drudgery, as a curse. This attitude had left them with what the writer of the 106th Psalm called "leanness of soul."

Well, I am convinced that work needs to be given a new dignity, and this can be done in rural life better than anywhere else. If this is to be, however, the Christian sense of the religious value of work must be achieved.

(1) The Pursuit of Happiness, by Herbert Agar. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. Quoted with the kind permission of the publisher.

Drudgery we must get rid of, but creative work must more and more be given its place as a Christian virtue.

Another aspect of rural life that will need the inspiration and spiritual guidance of Christianity is the encroaching urbanism. This is the inevitable trend of our present economic system. The war emergency is indicative of what is likely to happen when the war is over. The technical industrial training and experience that millions of rural people are now receiving, both in the armed forces and in war industry, will create a new and more intensified urban psychology that will have a disrupting effect upon rural life. That more and more rural life will be involved in industry is an accepted fact. The decentralist movement should be encouraged, but with it there is need to keep vital the finer qualities that rural life is able to furnish.

It is interesting to note in this regard what some of the great leaders of other nations are saying. Winston Churchill in a recent speech said:

"I look forward with great hope to the re-creation of the rural life of Great Britain as a result of the changes that the war is making."

The Archbishop of Canterbury is not quite so optimistic as to the possible effect of this industrial change, and in a recent article in the Christian Century had the following warning to offer. Pleading for a federal system of cooperative government in the world after the war he said:

"But I do not believe that a federal system can of itself secure justice or even abolish war unless the economic life of men is ordered in principles more expressive of fellowship than at present. The trend toward war is inherent in the internal economy of the modern industrial nations The profit motive has become the dominant motive. It is this which has led to the sacrilegious sacrifice of rural England to urban interests, and subjects it to policies framed for urban conditions. It has turned man into an economic animal."

Those of you who know me would, I am sure, be very much surprised if not disappointed if I failed to say something about the pagan economics that characterizes our society, and that has played havoc with rural life. I shall not disappoint you. I think that such a reference rightly belongs in this discussion. I am not arguing that our rural economics is not involved, but I will insist that it is the victim of our economic paganism that has its roots in our industrial society. As man has continued with his inventive process, in the development of machinery by which he has been able to increase the material goods of the world, he has concluded that man and not God is the owner of wealth. The gospel of stewardship is a difficult gospel to preach in an industrial age when man has concluded that he can lift himself up by his own material bootstraps. I confess that I do not see much hope of reforming the economic system in industrial society. Profit and ownership are so closely intertwined that I see little place for stewardship, which I contend is essentially Christian. But it need not be so in rural society. In spite of all the scientific and technical progress that has been made in agricultural production—and it has been tremendous—rural people know that in the final analysis they have to reckon with God. Man sows and plants and cultivates, but "God giveth the increase." Rural people should of all people know that in all these things they are not owners but stewards. Christianity comes to rural people with this gospel of stewardship. The parable of the rich fool is a searching story that needs to be told and retold. "My soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years.... eat, drink and be merry. But God said, Thou fool, this night is thy soul required of thee; whose then shall these things be which thou hast provided?"

When we come to consider our rural resources this gospel of stewardship has particular spiritual significance for rural life. If the rural life of tomorrow is to escape tragedy it will be necessary for the rural church to exert itself and make the message of Christianity more meaningful and dynamic in the economic realm of rural life.

There is another and more tragic side to our rural life that we must not lose sight of. All is not glorious in rural life. It has been devastated and dehumanized. The situation of the rootless, propertyless migratory workers, the people who inhabit our rural slums, is a blot on the rural landscape. Is there no message for these conditions? Christianity cries out at the horror. The meaning of Christianity for rural life as it is lived by many of our tenant farmers, our sharecroppers, migrants, and a vast multitude of mountain people, is that the conditions must be changed. And by that we mean infinitely more than a changed rural environment. We mean a basic change in the economic system that makes such conditions possible. This involves both city and country. So long as the land, agriculture, and rural people are exploited in order to maintain interest, dividends, and profits for an urban society, just so long will rural people be destined to a subnormal existence. Christianity has message and meaning for these conditions, but we have been unwilling to face up with that message. The time is now upon us when as Christians we must speak out boldly upon the issues involved and, better still, move out with some practical projects to remedy the situation.

Christianity has meaning for rural life as nothing else has. This fact has unfortunately been buried under a lot of lesser or even non-essential things that the church has too often emphasized. In its zeal for denominational supremacy, or its slavish worship of petty creeds and doctrines, the church has all too long neglected the real and essential meaning and purpose of Christianity.

I think that one of the by-products of the present world crisis will be that we may be driven to a recognition and appreciation of the simpler but real values which are to a very great degree found in rural life. Rural life provides the opportunity for growing quiet again, of returning to the simple, honest ways of living, of cleansing our public life of graft and corruption, of getting rid of the hoey and hysteria that have taken possession of us in recent years--in other words, of becoming Americans once again.

The Rural Church and Interdenominational Cooperation

Here it is that a word should be said that would have been presented by Bishop Tucker had he been able to be here--the place of the rural church and rural life in the ecumenical movement that is growing in the world. I think it can be said without fear of contradiction that the rural church in the United States or for that matter in North America is much better prepared for the ecumenical movement than are the churches of the city. There are reasons for this. We have made more progress in comity adjustment, in the organization of federations, and in the several programs of church cooperation than has been the case in the city. Much still remains to be done, or course, but it would seem to be a reasonable claim to make for the rural church, that it is better prepared to lead the whole church out in the ecumenical movement than is the city church. If this statement is true, as I believe it is, then this places an added responsibility upon the rural church in this movement of world crisis. From the point of view of the Christian church the present and the post-war situations present the greatest challenge of its history. That challenge in a word is for the

Protestant churches to unite their effort in a great single impact upon the evils that are now shattering humanity. What right have we of the church to say anything to the warring, conflicting nations about getting together, unless and until we have put our own house in order? Moreover, there is not too much time to lose. The spectacle of our denominations, fussing around with their religious folklores, with their emphases upon creeds, doctrines, theologies, and our selfish institutionalism at a time in which the world is burning up, is one to make the angels weep. I repeat, that the rural church, because of its experience in comity and cooperation, limited and faulty as it is, is better equipped to educate the entire church and to lead it out into an ecumenical movement that will make it possible for the Christian church as a whole to make its contribution to a just and durable peace.

Moreover rural life to succeed must be lived cooperatively. Rural people have been thought of as ultra-individualistic, and there is a sense in which this is true. Rural life calls for and helps to create self-reliance. This has its perils, but it also has its advantages. Yet rural life calls for cooperation if the well-being of all the people in the community is to be achieved. Good neighborhood is an essential; therefore, we must do everything possible to educate and inculcate the principles of cooperation.

Cooperation is Christian; selfish individualism and rampant competition are anti-Christian. Christianity brings to rural life the true philosophy of cooperation. The rural church must more and more assume the responsibility for this education in cooperation. But if it is to do this it must itself demonstrate the principles. You cannot teach something you do not emulate. Christianity at its best is a sharing religion. This is one of its supreme contributions to rural life.

Now having said all this by way of the meaning of Christianity for rural life, it seems to me that there is little left to be said on the other side of the question, that is, the meaning of rural life for Christianity. This has all been implied in what we have presented.

Perhaps we could state this in a brief summary as a concluding note. The meaning of rural life for Christianity, in a word, is that it provides a more natural outlet for Christian teaching. It provides the biological opportunity by reason of its being the seed bed of our population. It provides the basic economic values for the abundant life. Land and the resources of land are still the primary industry, and agriculture is a primary vocation. If it is true, as I believe it is, that religion must find its expression in the daily task, then the vocations of rural life provide an outlet in which Christianity can attain supreme expression.

The home and the family are the most important institutions in society and from the viewpoint of the Christian religion are the greatest opportunity for the building of the Kingdom. Rural life is more naturally the place of homes and families, thus furnishing the church with its largest opportunity to Christianize society.

Let us here highly resolve that the stream of life in rural America shall continue to be enriched by the ministry of the rural church, so that it will flow toward the new shores of a nobler and better America. This is our reasonable belief, our adventurous faith, our ever-deepening conviction, and in the strength of it we shall conquer.